

CCC Interview with Sherman Yancey

Date: September 26, 2002

Interviewer: Larry Wilson

BOLD PRINT is CCC enrollee Sherman Yancey

DNR: I am talking to Sherman Yancey in Cedar Rapids. One of the papers that I should have with me but do not have asks you to sign and agree to let us use this information and be included in the publication. Do I have your permission?

It is ok with me. Fine.

DNR: Do you go by Sherm or Sherman?

Sherm.

DNR: Where was your hometown?

I was born in Bunch, Oklahoma.

DNR: Tell me the places you lived before coming to Iowa.

From there I went to Seminole, Oklahoma, then I went to Windsor, Colorado and from there I went back to Seminole, Oklahoma. From there I went to Kansas City, Missouri. When I went to Kansas City, Missouri I believe I was 9 years old.

DNR: When did you come to Iowa?

I came to Iowa in July of 1939.

DNR: How old were you when you enrolled in the CCC?

Well let's see, I graduated in June of 1939. I enrolled in July of 1939. I would have been 18.

DNR: What did you do before you went in to the CCC's, high school?

High school.

DNR: Did you have any summer jobs? Work on farms or anything like that?

Well yes, I worked on the farms during summer vacations. There was a farmer out there that his wife was gone and he was by himself and I worked with him.

DNR: Why did you enroll in the CCC?

We needed jobs at that time.

DNR: How did it come about that you heard about the CCC's? Did someone tell you or did you read about it, do you remember any of that?

No, I don't know where I heard about it. I knew it was an ongoing thing.

DNR: So did you sign up in Kansas City?

Yes, I signed up in Kansas City, Missouri.

DNR: Then what did you do after signing up?

Well, there were about 50 of us at one time; they're shipped us out by train to Malvern, Iowa. It is about 40 miles southeast of Council Bluffs.

DNR: When did you say you went in?

Entered in 1939.

DNR: July of 1939. When did you go out?

It would have been, let's see, about January of 1941.

DNR: You were in there a little over a year and a half.

Well let's see, I was in July of '39 to January of '40. Yes, about a year and a half.

DNR: Were you ever transferred?

Yes.

DNR: Ok, so you were at Malvern first?

I was at Malvern about, oh, I imagine 6 months or so, I would say.

DNR: Then where?

Then I went to Des Moines, IA. I went to Fort Des Moines at the Army base.

DNR: How long were you there?

I was there until I got out.

DNR: You remember the camp numbers?

No, no idea.

DNR: So you signed up in Kansas City and they sent you up to Malvern.

Right.

DNR: Tell me about the first days at the camp there, Sherm. What were those like? How did you get your barracks assignment? What did they give you, things like that?

If I remember right they assigned me to barracks number three and there were nine of us in that barracks. It was almost empty. And then they got us in a group and checked us in and told us what we would be doing and what jobs we would fill. And how we would get there and so on and so forth. The officer that was in charge of the base was a first lieutenant Army. He explained the function to us and what it was all about and what we

were doing and we were doing roadwork. Doing landscaping, building bridges, in Malvern around there.

DNR: Did they give you any clothes, uniforms?

Yes, they gave us some uniforms.

DNR: Government issued?

Government issued, right.

DNR: How about bedding, cots, blankets, things like that?

We had regular Army cots, and regular blankets, mattresses and so forth.

DNR: Did you take any personal items with you when you went there, that you recall?

All I had with me was my shaving equipment and toothbrush.

DNR: Did they let you keep that?

Yes, and I was in my personal clothes when I went there.

DNR: Sure. When they gave you that lodging, what did they do, just put a group of you nine guys together and say you go to this barracks?

Yes.

DNR: Were they wooden barracks or tents?

Wooden barracks. They were about three feet off the ground on posts.

DNR: You said there was only nine in the barracks?

Yes.

DNR: The camp wasn't full then, did more come in later?

Not while I was there. They had about all told; I would guess we had about 100 there.

I know about 50 came in from Kansas City and there were some there when we arrived.

DNR: Do you remember any of your bunkmates?

No, not there, I wasn't there that long. But, I do remember some from Des Moines at the Army base there. I remember some there.

DNR: Do you remember any of there names?

Legs Mentalcow.

DNR: That is an unusual name, isn't it? Where was he from?

I think he was from Sioux City.

DNR: Do you know if he is still alive?

No idea. I have seen none of them since '41.

DNR: That is what a lot of them are telling me, that they haven't kept in touch.

No, you went on about your business. Well, you really didn't know them. You worked with them but you didn't know them.

DNR: When that was over it was over, wasn't it?

And there was David White and he was from Madrid, Iowa.

DNR: Was this at Fort Des Moines?

Yes, Fort Des Moines.

DNR: How did everybody get along?

Real good, we didn't have any problems. No problems at all.

DNR: How about the food in the mess hall Sherm, was that pretty good?

It wasn't bad by God; we had pretty good food, yes. And if I remember right, some of them did KP duty. That is what they were there for; they ran the kitchen and the mess hall.

DNR: Some of the CCC guys had kitchen duty?

The time I was there, when I arrived there, the 14th cavalry was just leaving and the 18th artillery just moved in.

DNR: Was that at Fort Des Moines?

Yes.

DNR: Were there some head cooks and the CCC's helped out?

Oh we had some barracks chiefs is what we had and that was about it.

DNR: How about holiday meals, did they do anything special for Thanksgiving and Christmas?

Oh, we had our usual meal on Christmas, turkey and pumpkin pie and stuff like that. No, we were treated well.

DNR: When was payday?

Every 30 days.

DNR: End of the month, first of the month?

It would be the end of the month. It went out, we probably mailed out around the first of the month, I guess.

DNR: How much were you paid?

Well, when I was at Malvern I was paid \$25.00 a month. When I came to Des Moines as a staff driver I was paid \$40.00 a month.

DNR: How much?

\$40.00.

DNR: Out of that do you remember did you get some of it and some of it went home?

Nope, all of it went home.

DNR: Ok

And then my mother sent it back to me.

DNR: \$40.00 at Des Moines?

That was when I was at Fort Des Moines.

DNR: You were elevated there in rank; staff driver?

Yes.

DNR: So about that \$40.00, did they give that to you or did they send it all home?

They sent it all home. We did not draw anything directly from the government they sent it all home. That was part of the stipulation as a duty that our pay went home.

DNR: Did you have days off? Like weekends?

Oh yes, yes. Regular standard work days and weekends off.

DNR: What did you do on your weekends off?

Oh we had a rec. hall and we played pool and one thing and another, and being on the Army base we had a lot of room around there.

DNR: Did you have any baseball or basketball teams, anything like that?

No, no.

DNR: Mostly then just the recreation hall.

Yes. We went into Des Moines a lot.

DNR: How did you get into town?

A trolley bus, street car, it came right to the corner of the base and turned around right there in the court yard.

DNR: Hopped on the trolley and rode downtown.

That was 10 cents.

DNR: Cost a dime to do that.

From where we were to downtown. Des Moines was roughly five miles.

DNR: What about Sundays in camp, anything special on Sundays?

Well we were lucky up in Fort Des Moines, because we had a church there. We could attend church if we wished or right outside the base was three churches, Baptist and a Methodist and a Presbyterian.

DNR: How about down at Malvern, any churches that you remember?

I don't recall any except they would have been in town and we never went.

DNR: The C's didn't provide any church services that you can recall?

No, not that I can recall, no, we didn't have a pastor or anything.

DNR: Were there any sport activities in the camp, other than in the rec. hall? Like any organized ballgames?

No.

DNR: How about personal conflict, did you have any personal conflicts with anybody?

Oh, one time in Malvern.

DNR: What happened there?

I crossed bars with a guy there. I caught him stealing out of my personal stuff and I called him on it. And he got a little huffy so he ended up with a couple of blows.

DNR: And then what happened?

I got back what he took from me and that was the end of it.

DNR: So you caught this guy stealing your personal belongings and confronted him. You got your stuff back and that was the end of it? I bet he never did it again, did he?

Not to me he didn't.

DNR: Did he do that to others?

I had no idea.

DNR: What about other problems, any other things going on?

No, I don't recall any. When I came into camp they made a carpenter out of me and I spent all of my time in camp, repairing and rebuilding.

DNR: You don't know anybody that got in trouble and how they were disciplined?

No, no never heard of it.

DNR: You said something about how they made a carpenter out of you, was that in Malvern?

Yes, when I was in high school, I took four years of wood shop and metal shop all the way through. And I supposedly knew something, I guess.

DNR: So did they give you more training there on how to be a carpenter?

No. Just turned me loose.

DNR: When they gave you that assignment of doing carpentry work there at Malvern, did you use any of those skills that you used later on in life?

Oh yes.

DNR: So at Malvern you were doing carpentry work; what was that camp doing? Were they working mostly on road building?

Oh, road building, lakes, forests, stuff like that, rebuilding, redoing.

DNR: How about Fort Des Moines, what did you do there?

At Fort Des Moines when I first got there I worked on boiler repair, because we had all steam boilers on the home base there. And I spent my time keeping the stockers running and the boilers operating, repairing the leaks.

DNR: How did you learn how to do that?

Oh, that is no big problem.

DNR: You just do those things. Ok. And then what, were you always in charge of the boilers?

No, then I went and became a staff driver. I took care of the boilers one winter there.

DNR: Who did you drive around?

Officers and Major Darling.

DNR: Who?

Major Darling.

DNR: I wonder if he was any relation to Ding Darling?

I don't know. He lived on the base there in the officers quarters, he was married I know.

DNR: Well that wasn't a bad job.

We went to all of the other CCC bases.

DNR: So Fort Des Moines was the headquarters for the district.

Yes, it was headquarters for the district.

DNR: Then you got out and saw a little bit of Iowa driving this guy. What kind of vehicle did you have?

We had a 4-door sedan Chevrolet.

DNR: What year?

We had 38's and 39's.

DNR: I remember those. So down there at Malvern you did carpentry work, at Fort Des Moines you worked on boilers and was a driver. That staff driver sounds like a good job. Did you do that up to the time you got out?

Yes, it was fun.

DNR: Do you think out of those three jobs, the carpentry work, the boiler repair, the staff driver, did you get any special skills?

Oh yes, I think so. In later life I ran my own company. I had a heating, air conditioning and plumbing business. I was a registered plumber.

DNR: Did any of the people there give you any special instructions or anything like that? When you were on the work site, everyone got along ok?

Oh yes. We had no problems.

DNR: How did you get your work assignments everyday?

I just did them myself.

DNR: You just knew what needed to be done.

I knew what needed to be done.

DNR: And then on the driving, you probably went into the officer's headquarters to see where you were going to take the Major that day.

No, on Monday I would drive by his quarters and pick him up and we would be gone all week.

DNR: Oh really.

Yes, to different camps around Iowa. He would inspect the whole thing, their bookkeeping and their financial situations and what happened and so and while he was doing that I would inventory their supplies. Make sure nobody was selling all of the clothes or anything.

DNR: Did any of that every go on?

Not to my knowledge, no. I never found a shortage of anything.

DNR: So he would be doing his inspections and you would be doing some inventory work.

Right.

DNR: In any of these jobs did you ever use any specialized equipment? Like carpentry work?

Just regular tools, carpentry tools.

DNR: Where did you get those?

The camp had them.

DNR: Do you remember any fellow workers other than Major Darling?

Oh, there was Dave White that I told you and Legs Mentalcow and what the devil was that guys name at Leon? Lloyd Higgden.

DNR: You have pretty good recall.

Yes.

DNR: Was he from Leon?

He was from Leon, that was his home. Well Dave and Higgden and Mentalcow were all staff drivers.

DNR: They were?

Yes.

DNR: I asked you this earlier and I think you said you haven't had any contact with the guys who were in the CCC.

No, I would say in Des Moines the total CCC there was not over 15. There were some there that took care of the cars. There was Dave, Higgden, Mentalcow, and me and we had fun there. Bob Taylor was there; he drove the base commander.

DNR: What was his name?

Robert Taylor, and we maintained about 8 cars and we had three CCC mechanics that took care of those.

DNR: The officers did the inspections.

Well, they were Army officers; they had no connection other than doing the inspection work.

DNR: How about getting along with the city kids and the country kids when you would go to camp. Was it a mix of city guys and country guys?

Oh yes, there would be. Now Dave, you could call him country and Leon could be.

DNR: Did they all get along?

Yes, they all went to school.

DNR: Were there any Hispanics, African Americans or Native Americans in the camp?

No, not a one. Never thought about that.

DNR: That is one of the questions on the interview, but I will tell you something I learned. I went to the computer and read about the Civilian Conservation Corps. Each state has a list of camps that were in the state, like here it is for Iowa. And at the end of that piece on the computer,

it says something about that company. The numbers were issued by the Federal government to each company. Some companies had a letter following the number. The letter 'C' meant the company was made up of African Americans and 'V' was made up of veterans of the armed services.

Of all of the camps that I traveled into, I can't recall every seeing a black man. I spent a lot of time up at McGregor, Iowa when we built the state park there. The CCC's built that and the CCC's created Effigy Mounds and they built the lake up by Strawberry Point.

DNR: Did you do anything on that lake?

I did supervising on it. As a staff driver, that is what I did when I was in there, even at McGregor, supervising, designing and building. The C's built the lake down at Macbride. And all of the forests all away across the highway down in the south part of the state here from probably about Highway 35, all of the way to the state line. All of those spruce and pine forests in through there were built by the CCC's.

DNR: Some of those camps were devoted entirely to forestry work.

Well, most of them along that line dealt in, what you might call natural growth recovery or something to that nature. That was basically what they were dealing with, natural things was what it was all about. We did very little city work or anything like that.

DNR: Earlier I talked to you about specific skills you learned in the camp.

Skills like carpentry, plumbing, electrical, things like that.

DNR: You said you used those later didn't you?

Yes, later on I worked for a cabinet company for two years, building cabinets and Formica tops and operated a sticker machine that you would grind your own blades and everything that made molding, sealing molding and that sort of stuff.

DNR: Where was that?

It was in Des Moines. Cisco Cabinet Company.

DNR: Were there ever any injuries at work that you can remember? Did you ever get hurt?

Was there a doctor at the camp in case somebody did get hurt?

No, we had a dispensary and we had a guy there, I suppose you would call him a male nurse. No, there was a doctor there and we had a dispensary with two beds if I remember right.

DNR: So if you got sick with a cold or something like that you could take care of it. But if something serious came up you would go into town.

Yes, sometimes they had to go into town. Some towns, I wouldn't be sure if they even had a hospital. Most of them weren't very big towns.

DNR: How about any diseases in the camp?

No, no. The only thing I ever ran into in the disease line is because I hauled them home. It was those dummies that got out and were playing around and got gonorrhea or syphilis or something. Now this happened at Fort Des Moines, because at Fort Des Moines they had a hospital and they treated them there and then they would be discharged and we would take them home. That is the only one that I know about.

DNR: And he brought that on himself.

That is right, absolutely. You're darn right.

DNR: How about insect and rodents problems, anything like that you can recall?

No, not out of the ordinary, no. There may have been some rodents around there but nothing that really bothered anything.

DNR: How about work outside of the camp? Did you do any work down in the town of Malvern or Des Moines?

No, no.

DNR: Did you have any contacts with the outside community?

In Fort Des Moines I did. At the Fort Des Moines Methodist Church is where I met my wife.

DNR: You said there were three churches close to camp.

Yes, about a block from there

DNR: Is that church still there?

Yes, it is on 2nd and 9th street off Army Post Road.

DNR: Were there any organizations there like Masons, Elks, and Odd Fellows that you know of at the camp?

At the camp, no.

DNR: Can you tell me if you had any contact with females during your stay at camp, like dances or church socials; is that where you met your wife to be?

No, I met my wife at church, it wasn't a social. It was actually at church, she went to church with her mother.

DNR: So it was a regular church service?

Right.

DNR: How about problems with the young men in the local communities like at Malvern or at the Fort Des Moines camp? Were there any problems?

Not that I know of that I heard about. Never ran into any of them. We used to go into town there in Des Moines and, oh, we would go roller skating and bowling and things of that type. But I don't ever recall any problems what so ever. We would go into the parks where they would have all of the rides; I don't remember any problems at all.

DNR: How do you think the local community felt about the CCC camp?

Oh, I doubt that many even knew it was there.

DNR: Ok. Would that be the same at Malvern?

No, they were well aware of that because we were probably all together. There were about 100 of us; they knew about us.

DNR: No problems there that you were aware of?

No, no.

DNR: Do you have one most memorable experience at CCC camp Sherm? Any one thing that you remember more than any thing else?

Oh boy, just routine stuff. Nothing ever happened out of line.

DNR: Did you ever have any experiences that were really odd or strange?

No.

DNR: What do you think your biggest accomplishment was when you were at the camps at Malvern and Fort Des Moines? How do you think going into the C's changed your life?

Well, it might have been because I ended up eventually working for Carrier Air Conditioning for 18 years as regional manager in three states.

DNR: Sure, you learned those skills.

It had a lot to do with the plumbing, carpentry and getting involved in it and the design work that I did. In the carpentry work you drew your own blueprints and you went from there. That was in later years, after I got back home.

DNR: What did you do after you left the CCC's?

I got out in January of '41 and I went to work for Lake Shore Tire and Rubber.

DNR: Where was that?

That was in Des Moines there. It is now Armstrong's.

DNR: So you made tires?

No. I was only there a few months. I was there in '41 and then I left there and went down to Burlington, IA, and went into the union and gave them my \$50. I became a welder and went out west of town where they were building the ammunition plant and worked on water towers.

DNR: Is that the plant that is still down there, the ammunition plant?

Yes, same one. That is where I learned to be a welder. I don't know how many other tanks leaked, but they didn't seem to care one way or another.

DNR: Then where?

Then, I came back to Des Moines.

DNR: How long were you in Burlington?

Oh, I was there for about nine months. I came back to Des Moines and I think I went back to Lake Shore and worked there until April 11 and then I went into the Cadet Corp. The Air Force Cadet Corp.

DNR: So you went back to the tire plant.

Yes, I was there a couple of months just to fill in until I got around to taking my study lessons from the Elk's Club and learned all that I needed to know to pass the exams to get into the Aviation Cadet Corp.

DNR: For the Army?

No, for the Air Force.

DNR: Did you join up with them then?

Yes, I went into the Cadet Corp and they shipped me out to Santa Anna, processed me through and they broke them down into pilots, bombardiers and navigators. I left there as

a pilot, went to Thunderbird One to take my primary flying lessons and while I was at Thunderbird One I married the girl that I met in church.

DNR: Where is Thunderbird One?

Phoenix, Arizona.

DNR: Ok.

And from Phoenix I went to Pecos, Texas for my basic flying lessons and from there I went to Lukefield for my advanced flying which was back in Phoenix. I graduated from there April 11, 1943.

DNR: That is interesting. Where did you go from there?

I went to Roswell, New Mexico as an instructor pilot, teaching bombardiers how to drop bombs. From there I went over to transitional B-17 bombers and I left there to go to Las Vegas and I went to Ellis Field and was an instructor on instrument flying on B-24's.

DNR: Liberators.

Yes, and I left there and went to Gulf Port, Mississippi as a transition pilot on B-29's. I finished up there and shipped out to Europe and spent some time in Paris, Frankfurt and Vienna and Austria.

DNR: Did you fly any missions over there?

No, not there, I didn't. I went to the Middle East. I did all of my flying in the Middle East.

DNR: What did you do in Paris and other places in Europe?

I was flying a cargo plane, hauling cargo with C-54's. I was in the east in the Saudi Arabia Air Force down they're teaching them how to fly combat. I was there three years.

DNR: What did you do after the service?

Well, when I got out of the service, I got out in January of '50, went down and worked for the Francisco Cabinet Company. I worked there about a year.

DNR: That was in Des Moines?

Des Moines, we came back to the Des Moines area. Then I went to work for Northland Dairy and tried that for a while, wasn't too happy with that. Then I left there and went to work for the Iowa Power and Light. I was a salesman there selling appliances. I was there about two years and they pulled out the appliance end of the business and that is when I went to work for the distributor for Carrier, and I became the regional service manager

and instructor for all of Iowa, Nebraska and Minnesota. And I did that until 1978 and then I started my own business.

DNR: Where was that?

In Newton, Iowa, a heating, plumbing and air conditioning business. I ran that for two years and I came back to Des Moines, gave up on that thing, I was in the wrong town. I came back to Des Moines and went to work there for myself as service manager for 600 apartments that belonged to a company there. And I had a six-man crew.

DNR: I bet that was a big job. A big thankless job.

It was. And then I left there and went into business myself, operating out of my home; I had more business than I could take care of.

DNR: What did you do?

Plumbing, heating and air conditioning.

DNR: Everybody needs a plumber, heating and air conditioning person sometime. So did you do that until you retired?

Yes, I retired in '83.

DNR: When did you move up here?

In '89.

DNR: How come you moved up here? Do you have relatives here?

Well not exactly, my wife died in '88.

DNR: I am sorry to hear that.

And Mary's husband died about the same time. My wife and Mary's husband were cousins. And Mary's mother-in-law and my mother-in-law were sisters and I knew Mary for 40 years.

DNR: Sure.

So we went to Denver together one time and one thing led to another and I ended up here and we got married in '90.

DNR: Well that is good.

I came up here in August of '89 and we got married Sept. 2, 1990.

DNR: So did you like those CCC years?

Yes, they were all right, I had no complaints. I was just a growing kid; you might say it was a good experience.

DNR: I heard that from about everyone. I have talked to 32 men and they all said you learned a lot.

You grew up pretty damn quick that way. I did some growing up in Kansas City. They had some rough sections in that town. In high school I played a lot of baseball, swimming and we had a lot of competition between the high schools there. You get in some pretty rough neighborhoods in these games. In the summer we would go to the city parks and they would have baseball games and basketball and stuff like that. Played against each other in different parks. Well, I think we hit most of the camps here in Iowa.

DNR: Well, driving the staff car had to be a good job.

It was an easy job. An easy, clean job.

End of Interview.

Updated and corrected with some grammatical changes by Larry Wilson on August 11, 2005 after receiving information from Sherm Yancey.

